Aleister Crowley 1898-1911

An Introductory Essay by Major-General J.F.C. Fuller

The legend that Aleister Crowley was the wickedest man in the world was concocted by the gutter press, and fertilized by his own vanity. If the world would not accept him as one of its greatest of lyric poets, he determined that it should do so as the Beast of the Apocalypse. This came easily to him, because his parents were Plymouth Brethren of the narrowest type, and, incredible as it may seem, it was his mother who believed him to be that Beast, and fixed on him its name. Actually, what manner of man was he?

In my opinion, a versatile and unbalanced genius: a poet, a philosopher, a mountaineer, a skilled player of chess, a brilliant conversationalist, and a deeply read student of the occult. Also he was a man at daggers drawn with conventional religion, ever eager to trail his coat and shock society. He did not object to criticism of his poems, nor of his magic, nor even of his erratic behaviour, as long as he was flush; but when broke, as he periodically was, he would not hesitate to stoop to the meanest of actions in order to justify himself. By so doing, he alienated all his closest friends.

When his father died, he came under the guardianship of his maternal uncle, George Archibald Bishop, a religious fanatic. Later, he went to Trinity, Cambridge, and on coming of age inherited a third of his father's fortune, said to be £50,000. The life interest of another third went to his mother, and the remaining third was split up into life interests among a number of relatives, to all of whom he was the residual legatee.

On leaving Cambridge he became acquainted with an occultist, George Cecil Jones, who introduced him to Samuel Liddell Mathers, the hierophant of a mystical fraternity, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, of which Jones and also W.B. Yeats were members, and in November, 1898, Crowley was initiated in it as a neophyte. This was the first great turning point in his life.

Mathers was a profound student of the Hebrew Kabbala, and he divulged to Crowley its doctrines, including the secret, revealed by the Kabbalist Pico della Mirandola in the 15th century, that Sammael (Satan) and not Tetragrammaton (YHVH) the Jehovah of the Old Testament, was the lord of the world. And that, as the

medieval sorcerers whispered, Daemon est Deus inversus.

Sammael was androgenous, and his counterpart was Esheth Zenunim, the Harlot, or Woman of Whoredoms, also called Lilith, which signifies "night". He was the active principle, while she was the passive, and when in union they formulate the Antichrist, or Anti-Logos, known as Hay-yah (also as Chiva) the Beast, the numerical value of which is 25, one unit less than that of Tetragrammaton. Hence Omar Khayyam's:

> A Hair perhaps divides the False and True;
> Yes, and a single Alif were the clue -
> Could you but find it - to the Treasure house,
> And peradventure to THE MASTER too

(N.B. the numerical value of Alif - A - is one).

Nothing could have fitted Crowley's loathing of the religion of his parents better. Henceforth he was the Beast his mother had named him, and as such he would invert the world and become God, or, at least, be absorbed into the Godhead. Listen to him in his mystical poem "Aha" (see "The Equinox," Vol.1, No.3):

Marsyas, the Adept:

> My stature shall surpass the stars:
> He hath said it! Men shall worship me
> In hidden woods, on barren scaurs,
> Henceforth to all eternity.

Olympas, his pupil:

> Hail! I adore thee! Let us feast.

Marsyas:

> I am the consecrated Beast.
> I build the Abominable House.
> The Scarlet Woman is my Spouse.

In 1900 we find him in Mexico climbing volcanoes. And in 1902 he set out with five others to climb Chogo Ri (also called "K2" and "Mount Godwin Austin") in Baltistan, which ranks after Everest as the second highest mountain in the world. After spending 68 days on a glacier, bad weather compelled the abandonment of the attempt.

In 1903, on August 12, in circumstances too complex to relate here, he married Rose, the sister of Gerald Kelly the artist, who had been an undergraduate with him at Cambridge. In the following year he and his wife went to Cairo, where he stepped over the threshold of the second great turning point in his magical career.

There he spent a night with Rose in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid, and carried out an invocation, which lit up the chamber - so he said - with astral light. Next, when in the Cairo Museum, Rose suddenly stopped before a show-case; pointed at a stele numbered 666 - the number of the Beast - and exclaimed - "there!"

What actually followed is obscure. It would appear that Crowley passed into a kind of trance, during which, between noon and one o'clock on three consecutive days a spirit, that called itself Aiwaas, and claimed to be the minister of Hoor-Paar-Kraat, who from 1904 onward for 2,000 years was to govern the world dictated to him "The Book of the Law" ("Liber Al vel Legis").

My own interpretation is, that the spirit was Crowley's subconscious mind and the dictation automatic writing. Whatever it was, it convinced him that he had contacted the new Aeon of the god Horus. Later, he linked up the message he had received with Rabelais' Abbey of Tholema and its rule of "Fay ce que voudras" which he expanded into "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law. Love is the law, love under will."

Strange to say, he took little notice of this remarkable revelation until years later; but when he did, it became an overmastering obsession.

After his return home, his wife gave birth to a daughter, whom he named Lilith, and a few months later he decided on another mountaineering exploit. This time it was to climb Kanchenjunga, the world's third highest mountain, and, as a preliminary move, he took Rose and her infant child to Burma. Shortly before the attempt was made - it ended in failure - chance involved me in the Crowley saga.

At the time I was stationed at Lucknow, and in a journal "The Literary Guide," I happened to read a review of Crowley's "Why Jesus Wept." I wrote for it, and in it found a leaflet

in which he offered a prize of £100 for the best essay on his works in their "Traveller's Edition." I ordered it, and on its arrival, with the inconsequence of youth, I decided to chance my luck.

Soon after followed the first letter I received from Crowley. It was addressed from the Drum Druid Hotel, Darjeeling, and was dated June 26, 1905. It began: "Dear Sir, your letter of May 17 has been forwarded to me here, where I am preparing a small expedition to Kanchenjunga;" and it informed me that copies of all his later poems, which were to appear in vol.II of "The Traveller's Edition" - still in the press - had been posted to me.

I spent the hot weather writing the essay, and in October went down with a record attack of enteric fever; instead of the normal 21 days, it topped 70. In the spring of 1906 I was invalided home, and on August 8 received, in return to a letter of mine, the following reply from Crowley.

"I am sorry to hear of your enteric fever, but fate has treated me even worse; for after a most successful trip through China without a day's illness for any of us, our baby girl died of that very disease on the way home."

A week later I met Aleistor and his wife for the first time at the old Hotel Cecil in the Strand, and in October my essay, "The Star in the West" was finished and posted to Crowley. In 1907 it was published, and in it, among other things, I analysed Crowley's philosophy, which I called "Crowleyanity." Some of it was leg-pull, but the greater part a serious attempt to fathom it. Symbolically it is depicted on p.215, and I mention this because three years later the gutter press described "Crowleyanity" as a "bacchanalian riot of orgies!"

In 1908, Crowley decided to bring out a biennial publication called "The Equinox." He described it as "The Official Organ of the A.·. A.·. and the Review of Scientific Illuminism." On its cover was printed the slogan: "The Method of Science...The Aim of Religion." But, like so many of his projects, the aim was protean and the method erratic; and it became a kind of occult emporium of mystical knowledge. It sold like hot cakes, and, in spite of its expensive production, had he not been so prodigal, it might have provided him with a modest income.

The Order of the A.·. A.·. demands a brief explanation. So far as my knowledge goes, it never existed outside Crowley's imagination, and was no more than a duplicate of Madam Blavatsky's Himalayan Mahatmas. He created several of these ghostly orders, such as L.I.L., "The Lamp of Illimitable Light," and O.T.O., "The Order of Oriental Templars." He loved to play with them, and when broke, on the lines of the Philosopher's Stone, found them convenient instruments wherewith to extract gold from the pockets of his more affluent followers.

In 1909, with the poet Victor B. Neuburg, who since 1906 had become his chela (a cross between a disciple and a maid of all works) he carried out his "Operation of the Thirty Aethyrs" (see "The Equinox," vol.I, No.5) in the Sahara, and on his return was financially a desert.

In 1910 I saw little of him, and in August sensed danger when I received a letter from him in which he informed me: "There is some hope of things turning out right for us all. Don't say a word until it is a fait accompli, as you are financially interested." I was not, nor did I know what he was up to. But I had my suspicions that he was contemplating the irrigation of the Sahara.

Soon after, I became aware of what he was about. It was to give a series of public performances, entitled "The Rites of Eleusis," in order to raise money for the A.·. A.·. ! Because a number of his friends strongly objected to it, I urged him to abandon the project. Also I had a hunch that he was dabbling with fire. But the more he was pressed, the more stubborn he became.

The Rites, which coincided with his wife divorcing him, were performed at the Caxton Hall, Westminster, between October 19 and November 30, 1910. They were heralded by an artistic brochure, on the brown cover of which was stamped a black swastika. In it was the following:

"In order to induce religious ecstasy in its highest form Crowley proposes to hold a series of religious services; seven in number. These services...will be conducted by Aleister Crowley himself, assisted by other Neophytes of the A.·. A.·., the mystical society, one of whose Mahatmas is responsible for the foundation of THE EQUINOX."

In every sense the performances were most proper, though dim, because the stage was candle lit. So innocent were they that I took my mother to one of them. Innocence, however, is no shield against the vomitings of the gutter press. In "The Looking Glass" of October 29, a racing rag, edited by a man called F. de Wend Fenton, the A.·. A.·. was described as "a blasphemous sect, whose proceedings conceivably lend themselves to immorality of the most revolting character." To heel came "John Bull," Bottomley's muck raker. It asked: "Is a new Smyth-Piggott among Us?" - this referred to an amorous parson, recently in trouble over his "Abode of Love."

I wrote to Crowley, so did others of his friends, and we urged him to take proceedings of libel against "The Looking Glass." He refused to do so, and gave as an excuse that an English judge had once said: "Suffer any wrong that may be done you rather than seek redress at law."

Three days later, Cecil Jones, whose name had been bracketed with Crowley's, had a writ of criminal libel served on "The Looking Glass," and in his letter to me added: "Crowley goes to Algeria tomorrow. Some of his friends will say he ran away." Emphatically de Wend Fenton did, and in his issue of December 17 wrote:

"We understand that Mr. Aleister Crowley has left London for Russia. This should do much to mitigate the rigour of the St. Petersburg winter.

"We have to congratulate ourselves on having temporarily extinguished one of the most blasphemous and cold-blooded villains of modern times."

The case came before Mr. Justice Sorutton on April 26, 1911, and on the findings judgment was entered for the defendants.

Jones lost his case. (1) Because Crowley (who was in court) had not prosecuted "The Looking Glass." (2) Because Jones had not subpoenaed him. And (3) because in the margins of Crowley's "Ambrosii Magi Hortus Rosarum" (see "Collected Works, vol.II) a number of schoolboyish acrostics in Latin were printed, the initials of which spelt out four-letter words; therefore all his writings were taken by the jury to be obscene. Shades of Lady Chatterley and of Bobby Burns!

Later, I asked Jones why he had not subpoenaed Crowley. His reply was: "If, as my friend, he had not the decency to come forward willingly, it would have been an insult to myself had I compelled him to do so." He was an exceedingly upright man with a high sense of honour.

After the trial, I wrote to Crowley and told him that our friendship was at an end. Stubborn as ever, on May 4 I received in reply: "...you are wrong. It was not want of pluck that decided my action in November. It was, as I told you, mystical reasons." It was nothing of the sort, in November it had been an asinine saying he attributed to a judge.

From the day of the trial I never met him again, nor did I communicate with him, and until his death in 1947 all I garnered of him were the periodic effusions of the gutter press. Yet the neophyte of Euterpe and Erato endures.

To me he remains one of the greatest of English lyric poets, and among those of France, comparable with Rimbaud and Baudelaire. By the magic of Eros the Beast in him was transfigured into Beauty: "Alice;" "Clouds without Water;" many of the poems enshrined in "Gargoyles," "The Winged Beetle" and "Rodin in Rime;" the superb "La Gitana" in "Konx om Pax," and the incomparable four "Rosas" are works of the highest poetic genius. Much of the rest is Hudibrastic satire, and some of it is swill.

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The numbers in square brackets, following date of publication, refer to the entries in Gerald Yorke's Bibliography of the Works of Aleister Crowley, published in "The Great Beast," by John Symonds, pp.301-310.

"Society for the Propagation of Religious Truth" appears throughout the catalogue as S.P.R.T.